

House Republican Press Release

May 19, 2005

Press Office: 860-240-8700

State Goes Too Far in Mandating Recess, Food Policies



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The issue of childhood obesity is a serious one, which the state legislature thinks it can fix with new mandates from Hartford.

The state legislature already tells public schools to teach 180 days a year, with 900 hours of actual schoolwork, what subjects to teach, how to test and what results are expected. Then, there are physical exercise requirements, as well as health, sex education and other mandates.

Now, out of sincere concern for student health, the legislature wants to add another 60 hours a year of mandatory school recess and tell school districts what kinds of food and beverages to sell to students.

Local boards of education, parent-teacher groups and educators will have no say in the matter, with no public hearings. The state, not parents, will dictate what is healthy and nutritious for the public school children of Connecticut.

The legislation is based on a faulty assumption that educators, already overburdened with academic and other requirements, can solve the social problem of overweight children.

Certainly, we all agree that children drink too much soda and not enough milk. Yes, many children desperately need to put away their electronic games and go play some outdoor sports.

But should teachers, already working to teach a full curriculum of academic subjects, be burdened with resolving yet another social issue? Should all schools involving 600,000 Connecticut students be bound by a one-size-fits-all food service and recess policy handed down from Hartford?

It is beginning to feel a bit like the Big Brother of George Orwell's novel, 1984, where the heavy hand of government required strict conformity in all aspects of daily life.

At the very least, it is yet another unfunded mandate imposed on local school districts, like hundreds of other state mandates under which cities and towns already struggle. Already, teachers and staff work hard to meet the academic and testing requirements of the state and federal government. Now, they must watch over Johnny's eating habits as well.

In addition, the terms of the legislation are overly convoluted. It almost requires a law degree to follow the requirements of the proposed new legislation.

For example, it allows schools to offer only water, milk, 100% fruit or vegetable juice, and beverages with only water and fruit juice. It allows high schools to sell sugar free soft drinks or Gatorade type drinks ½ hour after lunch ends, provided they make up only 20% of the beverages they offer.

Middle and high schools would be permitted to sell all other beverages, if the sale is in connection with a school-sponsored event after the regular school day or weekend and they are sold at the location of the event and not from a vending machine or school store.

It also requires the State Department of Education to publish a list of recommended prepackaged foods and set nutritional standards for other foods that can be the only foods offered in schools in the state. This list must be published by January 1, 2006. The school districts must implement these recommendations by August 15, 2006.

All schools are permitted to sell foods not on this list at the end of the regular school day or weekend, if this is at a school-sponsored event and the foods are not sold from a vending machine or school store.

This latest amendment allows for any food to be sold as part of fundraising activities.

Overall, this compromise may be a bit of pandering to the soft drink industry and the boards of education that make a substantial amount of revenue from vending machines. The bill is flawed in many respects, such as in requiring recess but not mandating any exercise at recess. Students can just stand there, or lie down to rest.

The issue of childhood obesity is a serious one, but this is poor legislation to attack a critical need. What happens at school a few hours a week will not change what children do off school grounds or at home.

This issue is about personal choice and parental responsibility. The answer to child obesity lies in informing parents and children of the benefits of a healthy life style. The solution to overweight children lies in returning to more active recreation, after school, on weekends, throughout the summer and year round.

It also requires parents taking responsibility for the lives of their children and not leaving it to the schools to be the parents.

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